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ABSTRACT

Promoting academic departmental productivity requires vision, passion, and sensitivity while coping with the rapid pace of change. This paper presents 10 proven strategies for managing some common challenges faced by academic department chairs: (1) building a sense of family purpose; (2) establishing mechanisms to assure accountability; (3) developing a participatory leadership style; (4) providing admirable role models; (5) using rewards for hard, collaborative work; (6) picking battles carefully; (7) using empathy when problems arise; (8) managing "sibling rivalry" among participants; (9) mediating struggles with other authority figures; and (10) introducing new faculty members carefully. (SLD)

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Bringing Out Everyone's Best:

Ten Psychological Tips for Academic Department Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Promoting academic departmental productivity requires vision, passion, and sensitivity. Coping optimally with the rapid pace of change that characterizes today's higher education is as dependent on keen interpersonal skills as it is on scholarly and administrative competence. Ten proven strategies for managing some of common challenges faced by academic department chairs are discussed and illustrated.

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Introduction

With increasing numbers of young adults entering colleges and universities, it is an exciting time to be involved in higher educations. Simultaneously, increasing pressure from consumers and accountability for outcomes have combined to compel even greater preoccupation with excellence and visible achievement. The current competitive, cost-conscious era in higher education has accelerated the pace of change at the departmental level, while simultaneously demanding increased efficiency and accountability. Ironically, changes effected in order to enhance an organization's functioning often threaten the very efficiency and productivity they wee intended to address. Increasing departments' size produces numerous challenges. Incorporating new educational technologies provides valuable opportunities, but threatens to absorb untold hours of training and redevelopment time. Academic department chairs play a critical role in helping organizations make the most out of the opportunities being created by change. Their management of the evolution of their departments can help assure that all those being served by it,

consumers and colleagues alike, will be able to enjoy participating in the work of the institution.

Ten psychological strategies for improving chairs' effectiveness have demonstrated some utility in helping academic chairs to respond to the challenges that characterize many educational settings today. Both empirical and anecdotal findings are useful in framing constructive solutions to problems confronting educational organizations (Chambliss, 2001; Chambliss 1997; Chambliss, 1993). Leading colleagues in many academic settings has many parallels to the parenting process. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which being the granting of tenure, faculty members in many academic settings will share many years together. In fact, many will share more years in daily contact with their fellow academicians than they will with a given spouse (thanks in part to the divorce rate among those in the field), their children, or members of their own family of origin. In many respects, academic departments become second families to their members. Academic administrators can therefore be understood as functioning in some respects as parental figures. This notion can help to enhance the way departments are led.

Chairing a Department: Exploiting the Parallels to Parenting

Given that chairing an academic department parallels the work of parenting in many ways, it makes sense to consider lessons from parenting that can be fruitfully generalized to the educational milieu.. Several of the strategies that work well in our families also have relevance in the workplace. Although we certainly shouldn't view our colleagues as children, the fact is that the workplace recreates many childhood issues, and the psychological dynamics of departments are often evocative of family dynamics. It can be helpful to use this analogy in considering the following practical tips.

Ten Practical Tips for Department Chairs

1. Building a sense of "family purpose" can help promote individual, departmental, and institutional productivity. Aligning individual, departmental, and institutional objectives is the key to facilitating faculty embers growth and success. Providing clear, challenging expectations is important, as is helping some faculty structure their time and maintain an organized approach to their work. The chair's main job is to provide needed resources and direction.

2. Establishing mechanisms to assure accountability will help faculty keep from abusing their substantial free time. Supervising and giving feedback in a sensitive manner can enhance faculty members' satisfaction, while simultaneously permitting chairs to nip problems in the bud.

3. A participatory leadership style fosters a valuable sense of control and increases the faculty members' sense of ownership. Faculty who feel highly involved in departmental decision-making have better morale, waste less time grousing, and pitch in during peak periods of demand. Micromanaging undermines faculty motivation, and leaves faculty feel untrusted. This in turn can make it harder for them to trust the administration.

4. Providing an admirable role model helps set the tone for the department. Chairs that are respectful, honest, assertive, and conscientious provide a positive example, but also maintain a sense of safety within the department. This can help chairs reduce destructive rumors and distracting anxiety.

5. The best way to build positive behavior is to catch people being good. Depending more heavily on the carrot than the stick works wonders; it makes sense to use varied rewards to

convey your appreciation for hard, collaborative work.

6. Picking your battles carefully can reduce the level of stress in your life, and can also avoid eliciting reactance. Reactance refers to individuals' tendencies to assert freedom whenever they feel their freedom has been threatened. Criticizing and giving excessive directions and advice often spur oppositional behavior.
7. Colleagues don't like being told what to do any more than children do! Instead, use heavy doses of empathy when problems arise. It is often useful to refrain from jumping in and giving solutions when faculty members bring you their problems. Although it seems paradoxical, helping isn't always helpful. If you provide a quick answer, unintentionally you may leave the faculty member feeling undermined and believing that you think s/he was incapable of solving the matter as well as you. Instead, active listening and reflecting are often the best course.
8. In order to build a terrific team, it is important to manage sibling rivalry issues well. Singling out top performers for public accolades can cause tremendous harm. Faculty members need to see that in our departments all can win, if wasteful competition and backbiting are to be avoided. Developing convenient mechanisms for all members of academic departments to broadcast their accomplishments, such as an easily updated Departmental Update publications (paper or electronic), can give all faculty members access to acknowledgement. Such a venue also helps colleagues to structure their work priorities and bring works to closure. It can also be a valuable tool in recruiting both faculty and students to the department.
9. Chairs must also mediate struggles with other authority figures. Use of solution focused techniques and helping faculty to empathize with the administrator's role can help people cool down and react with less rage (Chambliss, 1999). Solution focused interventions emphasize

the times that represent exceptions to the general problem being discussed. Rather than encouraging the faculty member to describe in great detail the general conflict they have with a colleague or administrator, this method of intervening gently moves from brief validation ("Boy, that sounds like it was extremely frustrating.") to a consideration of situations in which the problem is successfully avoided ("Are there any places where the two of you have better conversations?"). By refocusing the complainant's attention on more positive interactions with the same individual, this method facilitates the discovery of effective tactics for remedying the problem, often including strategies that are already within the person's repertoire. This is advantageous, because it's obviously easier to make greater use of behaviors that are already well rehearsed than trying to experiment with novel behaviors. Lastly, the complainant is invited to expand their use of the more effective strategies ("I wonder if there is any way the two of you could spend more time like that? Is there a way you could set that up?").

10. Bring a new faculty member into the department resembles the process of introducing new siblings into the family. In addition to challenging those already "at home", providing a good start for new faculty permits chairs to have an enduring influence on an institution. The department chair's approach to hiring new faculty and facilitating the newcomer's assimilation into the functioning department can shape the faculty member's experience for decades to come. It is in hiring and mentoring new faculty that chairs can make the biggest long term difference on their departments. Easing transitions for retiring faculty is also very important to department functioning, because our treatment of outgoing colleagues says much about our commitment and caring.

Within the Ursinus Psychology Department, as we have incorporated six new faculty

members in the past few years, we have found it very helpful to make the search process as inclusive as possible. Just as sharing pregnancies with siblings-to-be helps them to prepare for the upcoming changes, involving all colleagues in conceptualizing and defining new positions, reviewing candidates, and orienting new faculty members, helps these transitions go more smoothly. Given busy schedules and the risk of decision conflict, it is tempting to delegate the search process to a small departmental subgroup. In extremely large departments, this may be unavoidable, but even in these cases, it is desirable for every member of the department to feel confident in their ability to have input.

Nontenured faculty members are understandably anxious to have expectations clarified. The more specificity about standards and expected achievement we can offer, the more new faculty are able to focus on their work rather than their fear. Linking increasing scholarly expectations of faculty to the growing emphasis on student outcomes being compelled by consumers helps foster greater cooperation. Simply pressuring tenured faculty to be more productive in their research can often produce massive resentment and negativity. Priority can be given to research activities that are integrated with the faculty member's teaching role. Collaborative involvement of students in research projects can be recognized as a premier form of professional activity. Framing faculty scholarship as something we primarily do for our students, often seems to diffuse destructive ego-involvement, and build a sense of common purpose.

Communicating our assumptions about how new faculty members will make use of technology is increasingly important. Not all faculty members make intensive use of PowerPoint, Blackboard, and other educational technologies in their courses. Deciding how faculty members should be compensated for the extra preparation time associated with these adjunctive offerings is

important. While it is natural to assume that incoming faculty members, who are developing their course preparations for the first time, should be expected to avail themselves of current technological advances, maintaining high technology materials takes more time that dusting off lecture notes stored in a file cabinet. It may be reasonable in many departments to create explicit incentives favoring adoption and maintenance of technology-intensive teaching techniques, in order to avoid problems with "sibling rivalry" among those faculty that invest the substantial time needed to keep bells and whistles working properly, and those who take the more lazy way out by avoiding new instructional tools. Communications problems can result among different generational cohorts within academic departments if some fundamental common deployment of technology cannot be achieved. For example, a consensus must be reached about reliance upon email for intradepartmental communication. Otherwise, one segment of a department will be dependent upon this mechanism, while the other grows increasingly isolated. One helpful notion is to present the mentor role a mutual. More experienced faculty members can serve as mentors to new faculty in matters involving such things as juggling competing demands, structuring work priorities, etc., while newer faculty can instruct their colleagues about how to make more optimal uses of newer educational technologies. This helps all members of the "family" feel valued and important to the overall shared enterprise. Collaborative research and teaching projects can also allow faculty members from disparate generational cohorts to complement one another's strengths.

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